

CAUCASIAN "DRAGON" CARPETS

(about the history of the appearance of the motive "Dragon" in Caucasian carpets)

The Caucasian "Dragon Carpets" has repeatedly been the subject of discussion on the topic: Where from, how, when and why did the Dragon motif appear in Safavid carpets? [1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6] The spread and generally accepted opinion of many experts is that the motive of the dragon migrated in the South Caucasian carpets of the Safavid era from China.

It looks very tempting and seemingly - logical: Trade along the "Great Silk Road", expansion of the Mongolian and East Turkestan ruling dynasties neighboring China, the Uyghur masters who arrived together with the Ilkhans - all this information created the soil for this "digestible" approval. The old stereotype is "guilty" of forming such an opinion: Since the Chinese civilization and its dragon are older than the Safavids, therefore the motive migrated from East to West.

The authors of this position are minimally familiar with Chinese culture, and are very poorly acquainted with the ancient cultural traditions of the Safavid geographic and cultural area. On the other hand, the fact that the iconography of dragon motifs of Chinese and Safavid carpets has fundamental differences is not taken into account. But it goes unnoticed. Established stereotype performs its prejudicial mission.

Archaeological discoveries over the past half century, more persistently destroy the myth of the Chinese origin of the dragon motif in Safavid carpets. The Safavid Empire was much closer to another, more ancient center of civilization - Ancient Mesopotamia. Here, much earlier than in China, the dragon symbol appeared and existed. (Pict.1. Map Mesopotamia) The symbolism and iconography of the Safavid dragon motif has direct analogies with the Mesopotamian dragon motif and, quite indirectly, with the Chinese.

The influence of the culture and art of ancient Mesopotamia on the neighboring peoples is confirmed by numerous facts. These cultural reminiscences should also include the "migration" of the dragon's motive into folklore, mythology, literature, religion, culture and art of neighboring peoples. The Mesopotamian dragon motif was spread here long before the appearance of the Silk Road and the Ilkhans expansion. Numerous archaeological finds with images of the dragon over the past half century, also stubbornly testify to the long-standing spread in this region of the symbol and motive "dragon".

Let us pay attention to the cultural and historical environment of the Safavid area during the Mongolian expansion:

In the 13-14 centuries, along with silk, Chinese goods (carpets, porcelain, toreutics) appear in Persia, the South Caucasus, Anatolia and the Middle East. Decorative, ornamental and subject motifs of Chinese objects (including the dragon motif iconography) had their content and symbolism. The images of Chinese dragons were made in a style that was fundamentally different from the traditional artistic canon that

already existed in these regions before the formation of the Abbasid Caliphate and during its existence.

The ancient Mesopotamian dragon motif, kept in the local myth-poetic and artistic "memory", was a marginal pre-Islamic symbol. In Islamic cosmogony there was no place for a dragon and this monotheistic religion abandoned any pagan context.

With the arrival here of more tolerant Seljuks, whose new Islamic prohibitions were not yet so strong, the process of merging pagan and Islamic cosmogony acquires a total scale. The tribal ethnic consciousness of the newcomers contributed to the "reanimation" of the ancient pagan motifs of the pre-Islamic era and their integration into the new cultural environment. In fact, during the Seljuks, a frank pagan "heresy" was introduced into the Islamic cosmogonic doctrine.

Along with the resuscitation of local, pre-Islamic symbols, Central Asian traditions and motifs were also transferred. It is not by chance that it was at this time that dragons' images (1222) first appeared on Baghdad's famous "Talisman Gate" as talismans. The symbolism and motive of the dragon was legitimized in the very "center of the Muslim world" before the Ilkhan expansion. The same dragons appear a little later on the arch of the pavilion "Sultan Alaeddin Keykubad Mosques" in Kayseri (Anatolia), built in 1233-1237 under the Seljuks.

Most of not only the former Mesopotamia, but the whole Middle East at this time falls under the rule of the Turkmen – Kipchaks dynasties, who founded the Sultanate of Mamluk in Egypt. The Abbasid Caliphate, with its capital in Baghdad, in 1258, is conquered by the alien Ilkhans. Thus, practically the entire Western Islamic world has come under the subordination of the Turkic dynasties, which are tolerant of the ancient and traditional marginal symbols and motifs.

Craft and art throughout this territory, being created in the formal framework of Islam, is nonetheless enriched by pagan designs and motifs.

The history of art and crafts in the region at Ilkhans is reasonably divided into two stages:

The early stage (periods of the rule of Hulagu and Khubilai), in the composition of which the Uyghur masters took part, which the Ilkhans brought with them or deliberately brought them from the Great Mongolian Yuan Empire, which already included conquered China. During this period, East Turkestan and Chinese motifs were sometimes used in an authentic form or their imitations were created.

Developed stage (periods of the rule of Gazan Khan and Abu Said), in which the adaptation of ancient Mesopotamian, Turkestan and Chinese motives to the new Islamic aesthetics takes place. There is an intensive development of local artistic styles, canons and motifs that correspond to the new "artistic language" of the Islamic era.

In the process of this adaptation and synthesis, the question of the emergence of the iconography of the dragon motif in carpets, ceramics and artistic metal stands apart. The problem is that the local cultural environment of the Safavids of the South Caucasus, Persia and Anatolia already had its ancient content and symbolism of the dragon. The millennial cultural contacts with the neighboring Mesopotamian area contributed to the spread and affirmation of this symbol in the cultural environment of neighboring peoples.

Under the Ilkhans, the integration of local ethnic groups with the ruling Turkic-Mongolian ethnic group led to the nomadic tribes of eastern Asia who were at a lower civilization level quickly adopting local mythological motifs, adapting and integrating them into their tribal cosmogonic context. Islam at this time was still powerless against the artistic preferences of the ruling Mongolian dynasty.

At an early stage, Islamic doctrine coexisted peacefully with these pagan beliefs inherited from the ancient Mesopotamian civilization and tribal cosmogony of the nomads.

In such a complex cultural and historical environment, a new, ambivalent image of a dragon is being formed: at the same time, a terrible (death-bringing) and good - preserving (protecting).

The earliest local source of such a double designation of the dragon symbol is the Ancient Sumerian "Epic of Gilgamesh", in which the fearsome giant (dragon) of Humbaba is a source of death and protector of the cedar forest - at the same time. Let us pay attention to the description of the dragon Humbaba in the translation of the poem Georg Burckhardt: "He had the paws of a lion and a body covered with prickly scales; at his feet were the vulture's claws, and on his head were the horns of a wild bull; his tail and each phallus ended with a snake's head. "[7.]. Such a description leaves no doubt about the dragon's iconography of Humbaba. In numerous Sumerian cylindrical clay seals there is an image of the battle of Gilgamesh and Humbaba in the form of a dragon.

The image of a giant snake (dragon) is also in another plot of the same poem. In this story, a giant serpent (dragon) guards the sacred tree of Huluppu, which is the "Tree of life (immortality)", which Gilgamesh wanted to acquire in order to acquire immortality. Thus, the local, Mesopotamian-Anatolian-Safavid symbolism of the dragon had a frankly dual function with a predominance - talismanic.

As a result of cultural diffusion, the talisman symbolism of the dragon "migrated" the folklore of the local tribes and peoples. The expansion of the Arab Caliphate to these regions contributed to this. Different ethnic groups, nations and tribes, formally "lost" their ethnic identity, united in a single Muslim Ummah (society). The universalization of the ancient pagan motifs in the cultural memory of the new Muslim Ummah occurred easily, since all of them were already Muslims. Thus, the symbol of the ancient Mesopotamian dragon spreads along the route: southern Anatolia-Syria-Iraq (Kirkuk) - Persia-South Caucasus. In Persia, this route forks and continues its way to Central Asia along the route Parthia-Central Asia (Soghd, Bactria, Kushan) - East Turkestan.

Thus, the Mesopotamian (talismanic) symbolism of the dragon spreads throughout Asia. The proximity to China, which also had its own image of a dragon, enshrines this symbol in the artistic discourse of the artisans of the Turkic-Mongolian tribes. The influence of the Chinese dragon, if there was, was exclusively in the semantics of the social hierarchy of the symbol. While preserving the talismanic function and its own iconography, the symbol of the Safavid (Caucasian) dragon acquires a new semantics, which posits the state (imperial) power. The union of the ancient talismanic function with the new clan-state symbolism occurred in the Safavid dragon carpets, which were made by order of the Safavid palace or in the palace carpet workshops (karkhane). A huge

number of Caucasian dragon carpets in the museum collections of modern Iran and Turkey confirm this idea. They entered the territory of Turkey from Persia as a military contribution as a result of the defeat of Shah Ismail Safavi in the Chaldiran battle with Sultan Selim I Yavuz.

In contrast to the Turkic-Mongolian and Chinese symbolism of the dragon, the Aryan tribes inhabiting the territory of Iran form another image of the dragon, dating back to the sacred “Avesta”. Here the dragon, called “Azi Dahaka” is extremely negative and is the source of evil.

Now let us pay attention to the symbolism of the Chinese dragon: According to Chinese sources, in pre-dynastic China (3300 - 3000 BC), the dragon was a symbol of the water element and lived in rivers, lakes and seas. In the image of a dragon, traces of the deity of moisture and rain clearly show through. The dragon was originally associated with the fertility cult.

In the dynastic period, a new symbolism of the dragon is taking shape: the mythical king of the animals, the dragon, has become a symbol of real imperial power. In the late period of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), the image of a dragon was on the national flag of China.

There is a very clear distinction between the content and symbolism of the dragon in the cultural and historical environments of the Far East (China) and the Muslim world (Middle East, Anatolia, the Safavid Empire, Turkestan). In the first case, it has a protective (talismanic) function, in the second case, it is associated with the fertility cult and imperial symbolism. At the same time, it must be admitted that most of the carpets with images of dragons that “automatically” belong to China are of East Turkestan and Tebet origin. Authentic Chinese dragon is more found on silk fabrics. On the imperial and military clothing of China, the dragon symbol first appears in the era of the Yuan Empire, when China falls under the authority of the Turkic-Mongolian dynasties. Here it is appropriate to speak about the Chinese imitation of the Turkic-Mongolian tradition, according to which, the symbol of the dragon - the protecting talisman is used as an imperial symbol.

The stylistic and iconographic differences of this motive in these two different cultural environments are also obvious:

A) Authentic Chinese dragon has no wings. According to ancient Chinese beliefs, there is a special bump on the dragon's forehead, thanks to which it can fly. A distinctive feature of the Chinese dragon iconography are long, twisting mustaches. The full face(en face) image of a dragon's face is a typical Chinese phenomenon.

B) The authentic Mesopotamian-Safavid dragon has no iconography of the full-face(en face) image of the dragon's head. The head of the Safavid (Caucasian) dragon is mainly depicted in profile. The very rare frontal(en face) images available are rather imitations of the Chinese. Dragons on Safavid (Caucasian) carpets - always have wings. Safavid dragons have no whiskers.

Conklusion:

1. Thus, the historical-cultural, semantic and iconographic analysis of dragon images in Caucasian (Safavid) carpets suggests that there is a dragon motif in the Safavid cultural environment long before contact with Chinese culture.

2. The numerous archaeological material of ancient Mesopotamia and the comparison of the iconography of the dragon motif in these sources and Caucasian carpets of the Safavid era, confirms the local origin of this motive.

3. The Ilkhan expansion of the XIII century and the 80-year rule of the nomadic Mongolian dynasties, standing at a lower civilization level, could not provide such a quick creation of the new symbolism and iconography of the dragon motif. The Ilkhans factor contributed to the reanimation of the ancient Mesopotamian symbols, motifs and their integration into the new ethno-cultural and artistic context. The heyday of the Safavid palace culture contributed to the appearance of dragon carpets, in which the motif "dragon" was both a talisman and a symbol of royal power.

4. The South Caucasus and specifically - the Karabakh landscape-climatic area was a favorite place where the Ilkhans spent the hot summer, and later, the Safavid rulers. Historical chronicles report on the importance of this region for Osmans and Shah Ismail Safavi (11.508; 12.534). Karabakh was in the center of attention and freed from the Ottomans by Shah Abbas I Safavi in 1606. Emir Aga-Khan-Sultan Mugaddam from the Javanshir tribe, who was appointed governor of Karabakh(13.477). Considering the function performed by Shah Abbas's protege, it can be assumed that he was the conductor of the reforms of Shah Abbas in the field of carpet production in Karabakh.

Designs dragon carpets, which were created by professional artists in the palace workshops of Tabriz and Maragha - were sent for production in Karabakh. The Karabakh dragon carpets were a tax that was paid by the Karabakh ruler of the central Safavid government. The presence of the dragon motif on the carpets was inspired by the Shah's order.

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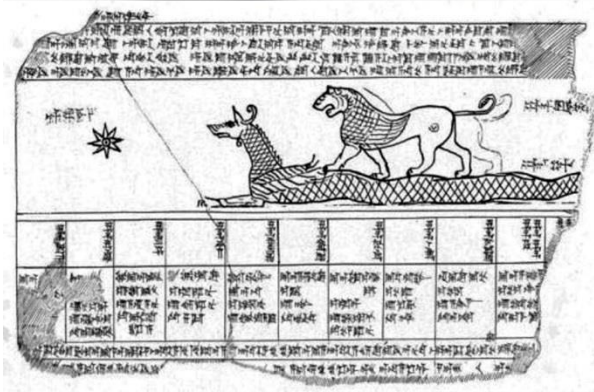
ILLUSTRATIONS



MAP. ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA



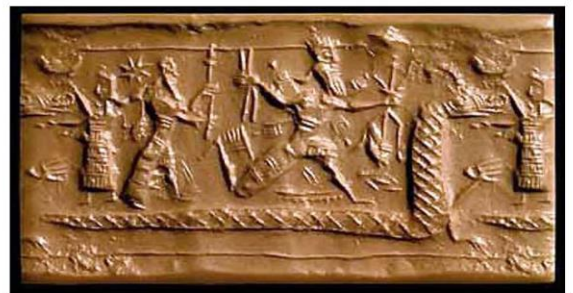
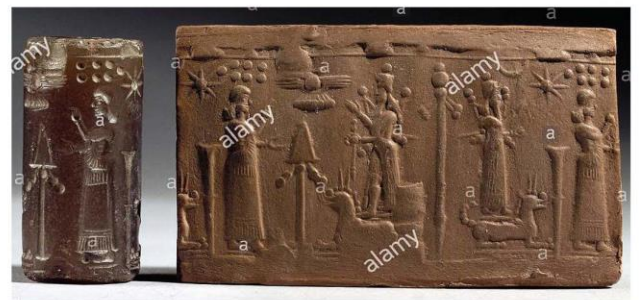
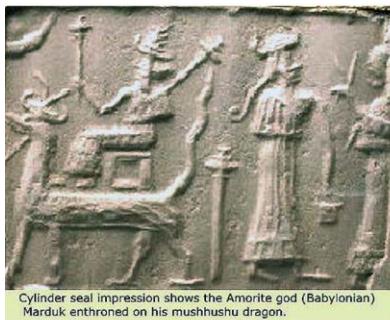
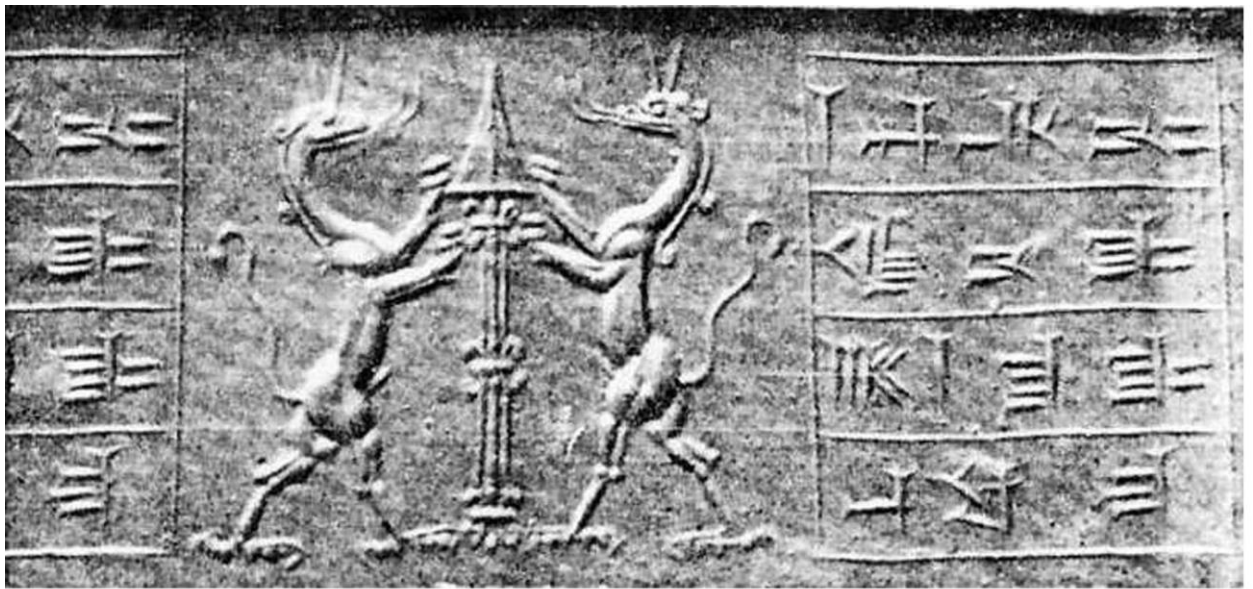
ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN DRAGON



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ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN DRAGON

THE COMB-SHAPED SYMBOL

The shape of this symbol varies according to the technique in which the pieces are executed. Its meaning is still problematical. It appears on Nos. 84, 123, 125, 139, 163, 173, 179-81, 182



DIVINE EMBLEMS OR STANDARDS (FIG. 25)

We use "emblem" as meaning a symbol which has been put into material form; when such an emblem is mounted on a long shaft (like a flag) so that it may be set up or moved from place to place, it may be called a "standard." It is often difficult to distinguish between representations

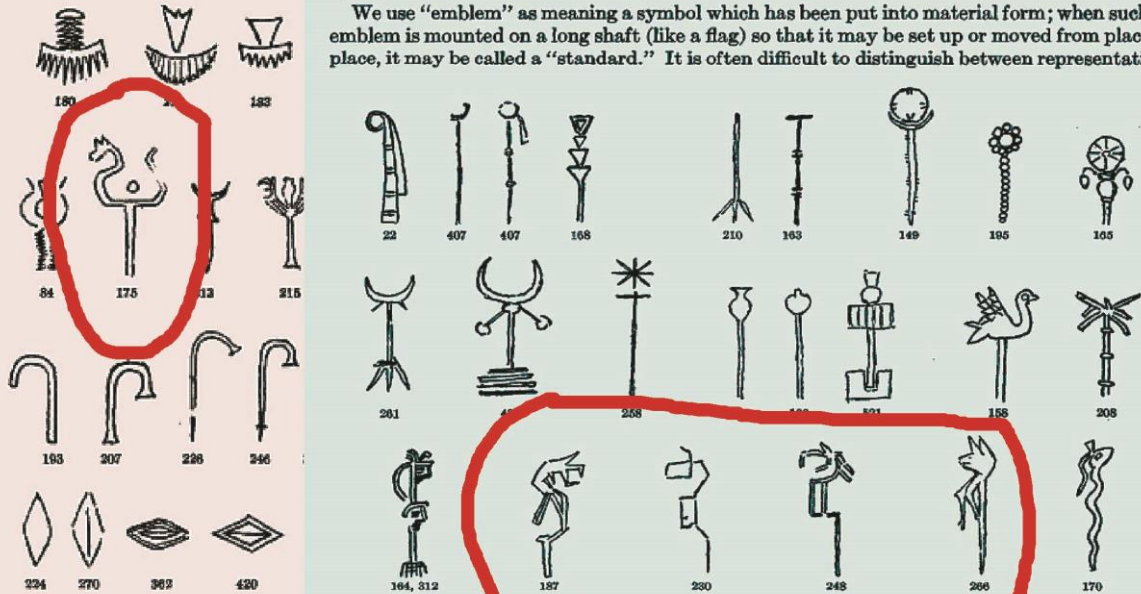


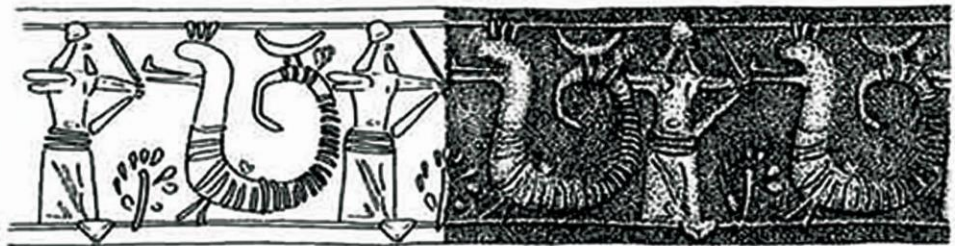
FIG. 25.—EMBLEMS AND STANDARDS



FIG. 26.—SYMBOLS

(on which it is possibly a later addition), 183, 192-93, 200-201, 217, 219, 248, 251, 255, the "Hittite" cylinder seal No. 340 (which shows Mesopotamian influence), and the forgery No. 693. Since an Akkadian seal found at Tell Asmar (field No. As. 32-600) shows before a seated deity a large two-handed vessel in a position analogous to that of the comb-shaped symbol, it is not impossible that the latter symbol, like the "libra," was originally a vessel.

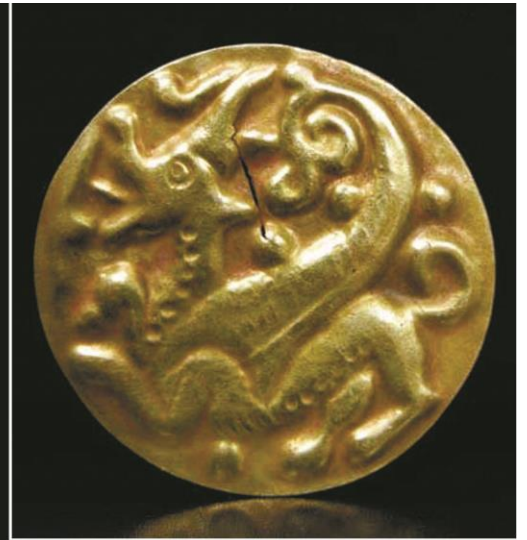
Divine Emblems or Standards.
Images of on cylindrical seals of Mesopotamia



ANCIENT ANATOLIAN DRAGONS



ANCIENT SOUTH CAUCASUS(NAKHCHIVAN. AZERBAIJAN) DRAGON

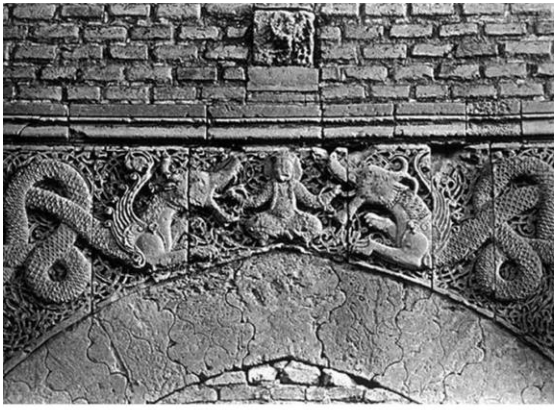


Kazakistan, Göktürk xan mezari ejderha. VI-VIII ə.ə.



Scythians (Saka). Gold Plaque. 5st century BC.

ANCIENT CENTRAL ASIAN DRAGONS



SELJUK DRAGONS



ILKHANID DRAGONS



ILKHANID DRAGONS



MAMLUK DRAGONS



CHINESE DRAGONS



China. Ming dynasty (AD 1368–1644) Emperor's cloth



Mongolian dress XVth century



The bow of a Mongolian army



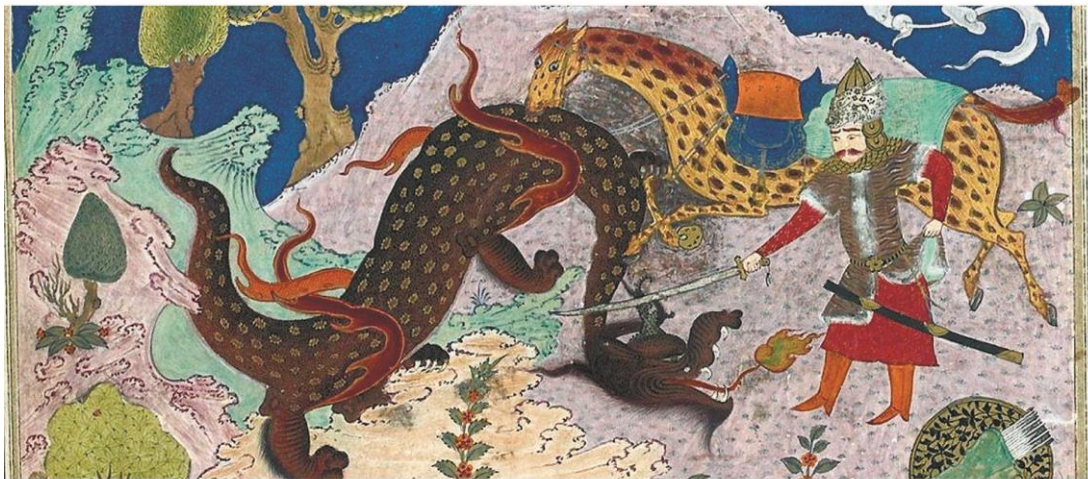
NINGXIA, MONGOLIAN, TIBET, CHINESE DRAGONS



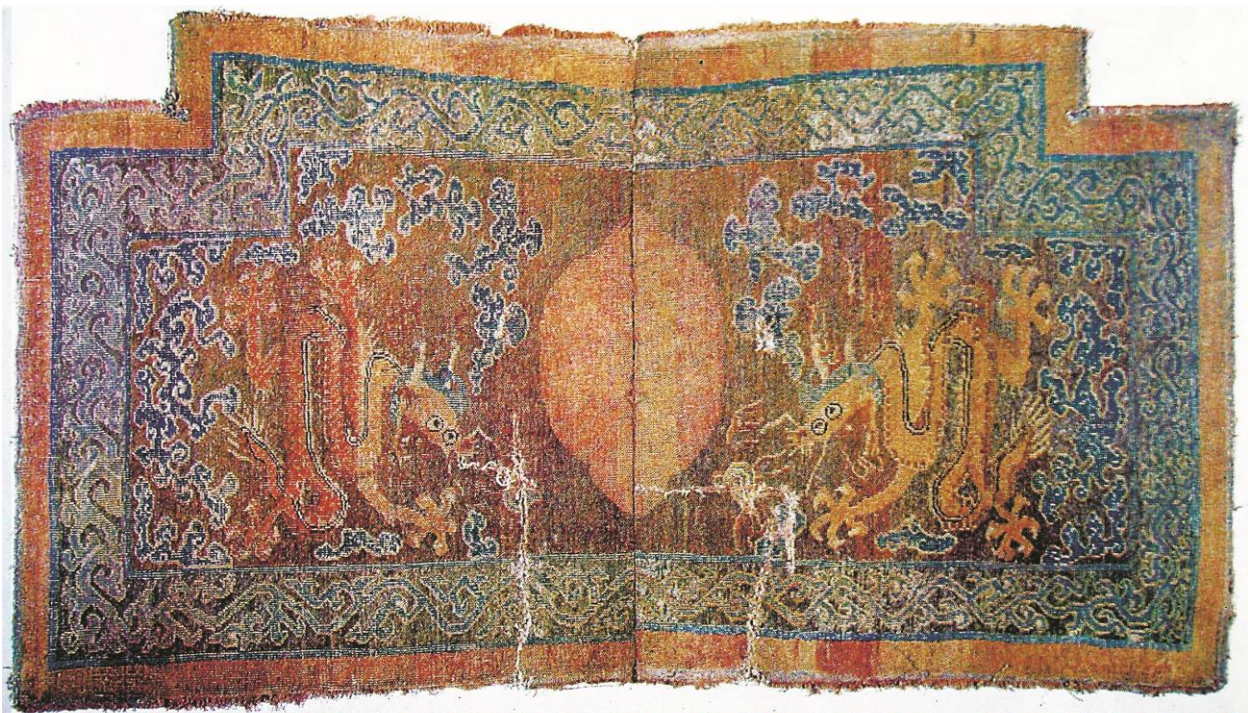
EARLY SAFAVID DRAGONS



SAFAVID DRAGONS



SAFAVID MINIATURE



Above: Ming Dynasty Saddle-rug. End 16th - early 17th century.
Below: Safavid Carpet. South Caucasus (Karabakh). 17th century.

Both of these carpets are created at about the same time !!!